

Tilburg University

Getting on the Same Page

Broeder, Peter; van Wijk, Carel

Published in:
Language Teacher Education

Publication date:
2020

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Broeder, P., & van Wijk, C. (2020). Getting on the Same Page: An inventory of language skills needed most in secondary education. *Language Teacher Education*, 7, 1-4.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

【Invited Paper】

**Getting on the Same Page: an Inventory of Language Skills
Needed Most in Secondary Education**

Peter Broeder and Carel van Wijk

Abstract

School success often appears to depend on how well students have mastered the language register prevailing at school. This paper presents an inventory of language skills needed most in secondary education. Lists are presented for five communicative competences: linguistic (lexicon, formulating), textual (reading, writing), interactional (reception, production), rhetorical (content, presentation), and informational (organization, search). Each list is based on interviews with language experts and surveys with school teachers.

Keywords

school success, language competence, secondary education

1. Introduction

All over the world, teachers are confronted in their classes with cultural and linguistic diversity. Many of their students prove to be insufficiently proficient in the language they are expected to use at school. This brings them at a disadvantage because school success is not only dependent on cognitive abilities, but probably as much on this scholastic language proficiency as well.

This paper focuses on a better understanding of what kind of language proficiency is needed in the classroom. The first part discusses briefly two theoretical perspectives on the acquisition of (school) language. The second part presents in more detail an inventory of language skills students are assumed to have mastered in order to continue successfully their educational career. The paper closes with a plea to put language teaching in a central position, not for language proficiency per se but for the benefit of all subjects taught at school.

2. The Acquisition of School Language

Two distinct approaches try to explain for the changes and their additional difficulties that students meet when they enter secondary schooling: a socio-cognitive approach and a functional linguistic one.

The socio-cognitive approach stresses the fact that when entering secondary school, many relevant linguistic skills have not yet become fully automatized (see e.g.,

Cummins 2008). In everyday conversation, meanings can often be derived from context; at school, language is far more abstract, that is, meaning is much harder to recover and often even needs explicit explanation. Lack of contextual support when figuring out what exactly is being said or written, makes the mastery of school language a highly demanding task that asks for a lot of training.

The functional-linguistic approach is based on the idea that language always has a function according to the social context in which it is used. School language is best regarded as a register, that is, a set of linguistic features and meanings that are typically used within the school context (for more details, see Schleppegrell 2020). The mastery of this register depends on the input of parents and teachers; to familiarize students with a register requires an extensive amount of verbal exchanges.

Both approaches share their emphasis on the central problem: a students' success in school depends on the mastery of a specific language. They differ in their theoretical explanation: incomplete automatization (socio-cognitive) versus insufficient knowledge (functional linguistic). Consequently, they differ in their didactical policies: training (socio-cognitive) versus modelling (functional linguistic). The socio-cognitive approach focusses mostly on 'how to do', whereas the functional linguistic one does so on 'what to teach'.

If we want to discuss and remedy the language challenges students have to face, we cannot stick to the functional linguistic 'lengthy list' of register specific language features (Snow & Uccelli 2009). There is need for an inventory that is both concise, complete and practical. We propose to do so by combining functional linguistic feature descriptions with the socio-cognitive processing demands: the list of language features can be rephrased into a smaller set of language skills. A skill is defined as an instruction for a specific action, e.g., be able to 'avoid cumbersome constructions' where the term 'cumbersome' is shorthand for a list of sentence forms traditionally considered detrimental for understanding and attractiveness.

3. Characteristics of school language

Taking the models proposed by Byram (1997) and Thürmann and Vollmer (2011) as point of departure, we developed the inventory in Table 1. This table presents five communicative competences and the language skills associated with each of them. The competences are linguistic, textual, interactional, rhetorical, and informational. The first two are tied most directly to language, the second two take language into the world, the fifth and last one has mainly an auxiliary, meta-type function.

Two studies were done to check, reformulate and elaborate the skills listed in Table 1 (Broeder & Kistemaker 2015). The first study was a qualitative one in which European experts on language acquisition and language policy were interviewed. The second study was a quantitative one, a survey completed by secondary school teachers in Germany.

Table 1. Communicative competences and language skills associated with them

Linguistic competence	<i>Lexical skills:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> get acquainted with ● course-related technical jargon ● conjunctions and prepositions ● modal (ad)verbs ● origin and meaning of loan words ● common idiomatic expressions ● regular abbreviations 	<i>Formulating skills:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● make specific and clear referential expressions ● make appropriate use of verb tense ● attend to <i>given-new</i> distribution ● avoid <i>run on</i>-sentences ● make careful use of preposed and embedded subordinate clauses ● make careful use of nominalization and passivization ● avoid cumbersome constructions (such as strings of PP's) ● be aware of informal expressions
Textual competence	<i>Reading skills:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● identify main points ● make outline of larger texts ● attend to context and goal of text ● relate information found in various sources ● understand visualized information ● give a (critical) review 	<i>Writing skills:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● use correct spelling/punctuation ● make correct, careful formulations ● attend to coherence of the text ● avoid ambiguities and speculations ● differentiate basic text types
Interactional competence	<i>Receptive skills:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● listen with (full) attention ● ask for clarification if needed ● ask relevant and critical questions 	<i>Productive skills:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● give relevant, appropriate answers ● participate actively in discussions ● give feedback to teacher and peers ● feel free to (counter)argue
Rhetorical competence	<i>Content skills:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● name and define objects clearly ● summarize and structure clearly ● use description and narration in a relevant way ● know how and when to explain, to evaluate or to argue 	<i>Presentation skills:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● bear audience/readers in mind ● make relevant use of audio-visual materials ● edit written text in a clear and attractive way ● make spoken text accessible and vivid with nonverbal and para-linguistic cues
Informational competence	<i>Organization skills:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● take notes and elaborate them ● follow 'prepare-execute-evaluate' scheme in reading and writing 	<i>Search skills:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● find meaning of unknown words and unfamiliar concepts ● find sources in the library and on the Internet

Linguistic competence addresses lexical and formulating skills. Students have to get acquainted with various extensions of their vocabulary and to acquire fluency in the way they make their sentences more complex and eloquent at the same time. *Textual competence* refers to a number of skills needed when reading or writing longer stretches of text. Several of them are dependent on linguistic competence as well. *Interactional competence* has to do with language ‘that comes to the open’. These skills are needed when listening or responding to others. *Rhetorical competence* has to do with maximizing effect, both in terms of understanding and of convincingness. These skills concern the content (‘what’) and the presentation (‘how’) of everything that is being written or said. *Informational competence* has to do with managerial concerns: meta-tasks that help direct an adequate performance in each of the other competences.

4. Perspective

Students do not enter secondary school with similar language skills, and certainly not all with the required levels of competence. This has serious consequences for the effectiveness of schooling, both from a cognitive and a motivational perspective. Learning results stay behind and ‘joy of learning’ evaporates. Schools need to attend far more closely to the training of linguistic skills. This has consequences all over the curriculum. Language is not one of these separate, isolated school subjects; it is the vehicle to bring forward the success in all school classes irrespective of their content. We do hope that the inventory presented here may contribute to any attempt to help students master the basics of learning: the understanding and production of language.

References

- Broeder, P. & Kistemaker, M. (2015). More willingly to school: Tools for teachers to cope with linguistically diverse classrooms. *Intercultural Education*, 26, 218-234.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Cummins, J. (2008). BICS and CALP: Empirical and theoretical status of the distinction. In B. Street & N. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education* (pp. 71-83). New York, NY: Springer.
- Schleppegrell, M. (2020). The knowledge base for language teaching: What is the English to be taught as content? *Language Teaching Research*, 24, 17-27.
- Snow, C. & Uccelli P. (2009). The challenge of academic language. In D. Olson & N. Torrance (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of literacy* (pp. 112-133). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Thürmann, E. & Vollmer, H. (2011). *A framework of language competences across the curriculum: Language(s) in and for inclusive education in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany)*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe (www.coe.int)